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Starting with I: Combating Anti-Blackness in Libraries

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Abstract

When millions saw the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota by the police during the COVID-19 pandemic where Black, along with Indigenous and Latinx, people had higher death rates, this led to a major awakening from white Americans that Black lives and Black bodies are treated differently. In response, many libraries issued statements supporting Black people in general and supporting their Black library workers. These statements were commitments to make change and to impact the inequities in libraries. As time passed after these statements, reading lists, LibGuides, and reading groups were created, Black bodies are still being harmed; so, where do we go from here? *Start and end with I:* This editorial details this concept and provides concrete steps for making change. Library workers must know the field's anti-Black racist history and address its ongoing presence. As individuals and in institutions, library workers and library leaders must take concrete steps for combating anti-Black racism in libraries. The Black Lives Matter movement benefits all of the oppressed because its tenets, when applied, address intersectionality and combat bias and discrimination for all Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. It is time to center the voices that have been dismissed and ignored for far too long. Are you willing to do what it takes?

Keywords

African Americans, Black Lives Matter, race, social justice, diversity, equity, libraries

222 days ago George Floyd was murdered.

On May 25, 2020, Floyd, a forty-six-year-old African American man, begged for help as three white police officers knelt on his neck and back for over eight minutes during an arrest. No health professional stepped in as a fourth officer prevented bystanders from intervening, all leading to his death on a street in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Even though the United States was in the middle of a global pandemic due to coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), it did not stop police brutality from happening to Black people. The subsequent release of the video footage led to a new peak in the international outcry against oppression, racism, and police brutality that had been building after the murders of Botham Jean, Atatiana Jefferson, Ahmaud Arbery, and thousands of others. Floyd is one target of an extensive history of persecution, mistreatment, and unjust murder of Black people in the United States and around the world. This unjust treatment comes as a result of anti-Black racism that stems from anti-Blackness, a two-part concept involving dehumanizing—or stripping Blackness of value—and systematically marginalizing Black-bodied people.

Anti-Black racism is a particularly insidious version of racism, and "beneath anti-Black racism is the covert structural and systemic racism which predetermines the socioeconomic status of Blacks in this country and is held in place by anti-Black policies, institutions, and ideologies" [1]. Anti-Blackness has numerous consequences. For example, the 2020 COVID-19 global pandemic exhibited these inequities to the world. The inequities in all of our institutions—from our school systems to our health care systems—are being experienced by the minoritized on a global stage. Floyd was a multifaceted example of both, as he died at the hands of a relentless and emotionless officer at the same time that he was COVID-19-positive [2]. He had heart disease and hypertension, which are overrepresented in Black populations due to racism [3]. He also had sickle cell trait [2], which, although often considered benign, is associated with several under-studied health risks [4]. Sickle cell disease is also under-studied and undertreated, and those with this disease experience discrimination, dismissal, and over-policing in health care settings due to its specific commonness among people of African and Middle Eastern descent [2, 5, 6].

Floyd's murder sparked an extended reaction that has had broad implications. Protests led by the Black Lives Matter movement began after the 2012 killing of Trayvon Martin and reached their highest levels of participation after Floyd's murder. The intensity did not quickly subside, and protests continued throughout the United States and around the world due to the continued shootings of Black people (e.g., Jacob Blake), growing recognition of murders where no arrests were made (e.g., Breonna Taylor and Elijah McClain), and inaction by those in power.

Institutions of all sizes and individuals of influence released statements in response to racism and police brutality in the United States [7]. Libraries and library organizations responded in turn with statements condemning racism and police violence [8, 9]. However, libraries have an extensive history of anti-Black racism; therefore, libraries still have much progress to make beyond the release of statements. Statements that are not rooted in firm, specific commitments coupled with resulting actions toward combating anti-Blackness have little effect on changing the status quo.

Now, 222 days later, have these library responses materialized into meaningful action?

The History of Anti-Blackness in Libraries

It is very likely that thinking about the answer to that question immediately makes you feel uncomfortable. It is very likely that what many librarians have seen or done is read literature about racism and social justice, built a LibGuide or reading list, even formed a discussion group, task force, or committee or taken an online workshop. But what are the changes that have been implemented and continue to be enacted 222 days, months, and years later? Libraries remain almost 90% white and riddled with power imbalances. Yet, it is likely that Black people continue to be over-policed as visitors, users, and staff. It is likely that Black library workers continue to hide part of themselves to remain viable in their careers, while facing aggressions and hostility as they inhabit their workplaces and pressured to remain silent to the visible inequities with which we are surrounded [10]. It is likely that many Black library workers continue to seek work outside of libraries due to traumatic experiences, imbalanced treatment, and low wages with little to no upward mobility [10]. This is likely because of the persistent history of anti-Blackness in libraries.

As publicly funded libraries were built nationwide in the early twentieth century, Black-bodied persons were excluded by law [11]. Libraries were built to contribute to a democratic society by informing the population as a public good; however, libraries' exclusion of participation by Black people in the aim of free and equal access to information was another tool of disenfranchisement [12], and it followed a legacy since slavery of prohibiting Black people from learning to read or obtaining schooling.

In the eighteenth century, "those in power saw lack of education as the key to slaves' continued subordination" [11]; and the intentions behind these discriminatory practices were consistent after slavery ended. In reaction to continued discrimination, Black people formed their own book clubs, libraries, and organizations, often in secret, to increase access to information for themselves. Black activists also influenced the broader community by pointing out how Black people were unable to utilize publicly funded resources, and these demands for access, along

with the “separate but equal” premise brought by *Plessy v. Ferguson,* were met with an unequal solution of funding for “colored libraries” that served and were staffed by Black people [11, 13].

Other methods of limiting participation or outright exclusion included segregated facilities where Black students had access to certain reading rooms in a white library or bookmobiles that provided service one day per week to Black patrons [11]. Even by 1946, fewer than a third of public library systems in the South reported providing any form of services to Black people [11]. Outside of Historically Black Colleges and Universities, libraries remained segregated until the Civil Rights Movement, and the change was largely from the US Supreme Court’s ruling in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which overturned “separate but equal” schooling and outlawed discrimination in public accommodations [11]. Even as these legislative actions became law, changes did not happen immediately, and, as they began to occur, they took place over a span of decades.

Mistreatment subsequently leads to a lack of representation

This mistreatment is evident in the following example: In 1936, during the American Library Association (ALA) annual meeting in Richmond, Virginia, Black librarians were not allowed to attend events where meals were served. Furthermore, Black attendees of integrated events were physically segregated to a corner away from all other attendees. The following year, the Medical Library Association (MLA) held its meeting in the same city [14]. The MLA meeting occurred without incident because MLA had no Black members and no Black librarians attended that 1937 meeting. So, a lack of representation in a group is a clear indicator of a hostile environment.

Systemic racism reinforces a lack of representation

Even after Howard University School of Medicine was solicited as a potential member in 1934, MLA did not admit Black libraries until 1939 [14]. The official criteria for inclusion were “collection and staffing standards to ensure that they would be full participants in the work of the association”; however, Black libraries were excluded for social reasons [14]. The systematic exclusion of Black librarians was furthered by policy: individual members did not have voting rights, reserving those solely for library members [14]. This exclusion continued throughout the association, as evidenced by the association continuing for 120 years before electing its first and only Black president in 2018. The interplay of policy, cultural fit, and consolidation of power allow simultaneous racist action and inaction.

This interplay continues through the history of US libraries, and, as Black library patrons and Black library workers see limitations in their participation in libraries, library leaders and library organizations reinforce these inequities. In 1960, as desegregation was being championed, library association leaders claimed that “ALA was as effective against segregation as its structure permitted and that it should not intervene in local situations” (Wakeman, 1960, as cited by

Lipscomb [15]) and yet did not have a Black president until 1977, with Clara Stanton Jones, followed by E. J. Josey in 1984. In 2018, as hate groups gained power across the United States, ALA's Intellectual Freedom Committee released a revision of the *Library Bill of Rights,* stating that if a publicly funded library provides public meeting room access, "it cannot discriminate or deny access based upon the viewpoint of speakers or the content of their speech," stating explicitly that this encompassed hate speech [16]. So, when those in power remain inactive against forces causing oppression, it can create further barriers to overcome.

The systematic dehumanization of Black people has continued in the library and information field, primarily through active efforts of aggression and passiveness exemplified by a lack of support. This has been sustained by continued proceduralization and inaction. Each step taken or not taken today has a concrete and lasting effect on the Black people who work in, visit, or are otherwise impacted by each library. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to implement changes that truly address and reverse these pervasive oppressive inequities.

Concrete Steps for Combating Anti-Black Racism in Libraries

There are numerous concrete actions that anyone can take to make an impact on the anti-Black structures, behaviors, and systems that exist in libraries. We must be willing to be uncomfortable in both thought and behavior in order to apply effective solutions, and power in our institutions must be equitably distributed, with influence used for good. Change starts and ends with each of us, how we interact, participate in institutions, and live in society. Therefore, the first and last steps are the same, to "start and end with I."

For true change to occur in humanity and libraries, we each must look inward at the individual (our own actions), the actions of the institution (our actions in the name of the institution) and systemic structures and policies that individuals and groups put forth or vote down, and the collective actions of humanity toward inclusion, integration, and equity. Each of these "I"s play a role in changing the micro, meso, and macro pandemic of oppression, racism, and white supremacy in order to have an inclusive, integrated, and involved library where all workers and patrons feel welcomed, are valued, and are treated equitably. The following steps are starting places to begin to address anti-Black racist structures in libraries.

Addressing the Individual

Whiteness in librarianship is so interwoven into the fabric of our culture that when anything is challenged, it seems like a personal attack. Just remember that this moment of discomfort is what Black library workers experience daily, in and out of the library. We are not given the benefit of the doubt, we are placed under a microscope and questioned, while simultaneously being dismissed and overlooked. So, to uproot the pervasiveness of whiteness, it will take the diligent work to start with "I," the individual. Change starts and ends with each of us, and everyone must

contribute and sacrifice to create this vision for libraries, institutions, and humanity. *Addressing the individual* means identifying those viewpoints that exist in ourselves that must be continuously dismantled.

Don't Wait Until You're Ready

> "We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented." – Elie Wiesel

Many, if not all of us, tend to want to be experts before speaking or acting on issues. However, listenings, readings, and group discussions are not enough to shift the balance of inequity that Black people face every day. It is important to regularly sit with the discomfort of the imbalances in the profession and to reflect on how our participation contributes to the ongoing harm of Black colleagues and library guests. It is crucial that we must each acknowledge and consistently remind ourselves of the impact and harm that continued inaction causes. Furthermore, time is a privilege. Personal development can take a lifetime, and yet we do not have a lifetime to wait for action.

To start turning the tide toward rightness immediately, non-Black colleagues should call out and address problems now. There must be an expectation and a personal acceptance that mistakes will be made, and, when corrections are given by those from marginalized groups, they are accepted; when experiences are shared, they are believed; and when steps are taken, they are supported. Libraries are made of people, and these people can act to create improved policies and outcomes for Black employees and acknowledge the entrenched structural racism that pervades American society and the world. The time spent on personal self-development is time that allows the structures upon which our libraries operate to remain strong. Inaction allows continued persecution, and self-growth becomes a mechanism through which inequality can continue. Therefore, do not wat until you are ready nor expect your Black colleagues to appreciate your newfound awakening.

Acknowledge Our Own White Supremacy

> "In our work and in our living, we must recognize that difference is a reason for celebration and growth, rather than a reason for destruction." – Audre Lorde

Regardless of where or how we were raised, we all carry with us some concepts derived from white supremacy, including elements of misogyny, Islamophobia, xenophobia, homophobia, and transphobia as well as bootstrap mentality and individualism. So, we must regularly unpack what we have normalized. These can seem like basic tenets that have often been far removed from their racist and problematic underlying origins, and yet they often cause unequal treatment in how we perceive, relate to, and evaluate Black, Indigenous, and people of color. Concepts like

meritocracy, professionalism, and objectivity have roots in discrimination and eugenics [17]. Therefore, we must assess how our perceptions influence our actions. Why are certain behaviors, ways of speaking, and other attributes deemed negative? How are the criteria for individuals' presence in an in-group and out-group determined?

Imbalance and overrepresentation do not occur by happenstance. So, we must determine the causes of these imbalances in our ranks. How do we each individually contribute to how Black people are treated in our organizations, and how can we shift our perceptions and behavior?

An example of the imbalanced treatment of Black library workers is viewing their self-agency as an attack. When Black people work toward their own career development and attainment, whether in their organization or in the broader profession, it is often seen as an affront by colleagues. Commonly expected behaviors—including serving on committees, presenting and publishing, and leading or developing library services—are often seen and treated as insubordination and are over-policed by colleagues and management. This can be reflected in lengthy, complicated, and unclear processes of approval and "no win" situations, where a Black employee receives a negative evaluation for too much scholarship or too little scholarship. Even winning awards becomes an area of concern for many Black library workers, who constantly have to monitor others' perception of their achievements.

Many library workers pride themselves on being evidence-based but do not see how the data reflect the outcomes of barriers in our departments. Lower pay, lower rank, and increased frequency of being written up or receiving negative reports to personnel files are signs that imbalanced treatment has pervaded the workplace, increasing the Black employees' responsibility for managing themselves along with others' sensitivities toward what they do. All of these factors lead to poor retention of Black employees. We know this. But the vast majority of people remain inactive. What does that mean in regard to how Black lives are valued?

Deconstruct and Rebuild Our Circles

As mentioned above, we should assess how we are determining in-groups and out-groups. Who is being left out? In libraries, informal relationships create tangible outcomes, including promotions, career opportunities, and collaborative research. Therefore, when groups that are built formally as well as informally reflect an imbalance in membership, this imbalance often leads to inequitable outcomes. Assess your own networks to determine who is receiving the benefits of in-group and network familiarity [18]. If you are not talking to and hearing from diverse Black voices already, you are already not doing the work. Therefore, starting and ending with I, requires you to build mutually beneficial relationships with diverse Black voices.

Addressing the Institution

Libraries have the greatest ability to effect change with action due to the collective power that exists within their bounds. There is also an ongoing history of structural and institutional racism that libraries must counteract. In 2018, ALA issued an apology for the association's silence during Jim Crow segregation [19]. The apology aimed to address the gross inequity that African Americans endured with segregated library facilities. This fact emphasizes that libraries are institutions situated within structures of a white supremacist and racist nation. In this environment, there are interlocking systems of oppression that must be dismantled systematically by starting and ending with "I," the institution.

Libraries must take measures to avoid virtue signaling, the taking of insincere, largely symbolic, actions "for clout," also known as paying lip service. We must move beyond performative acts of equity, inclusion, and diversity and go beyond words to implement true change for individuals and institutions. Galvan states, "Librarianship is paralyzed by whiteness. This will continue unabated without interrogating structures that benefit white librarians, including the performative nature of recruitment and hiring" [20].

Critical librarianship, or critlib, is the act of applying principles of social justice and critical theory in libraries with a focus on "both critiquing and changing society as opposed to simply understanding or explaining it," and, as health sciences librarians, we should learn how to apply social justice to our everyday practice [22]. Whiteness is an exclusionary act that continues to show dominance over those who are not a part of it [23]. Therefore, you must continue to interrogate every aspect of your job so that you will not continue to subscribe to whiteness. To make this happen, librarians must reassess and root out the causes for a lack of progress rather than rewarding themselves for "trying" or for having an educational or informational event. There is too much at stake to continue staying in this mindset. *Addressing the institution* means leading with race since libraries are institutional structures made of people who reflect and traffic in the ideas of the wider society, and race is the social construct that has explicitly been implemented to terrorize, dehumanize, and harm Black-bodied persons, especially in the workplace.

Revise Structures That Support Racism

> "The idea of library-as-neutral is seductive because of its usefulness and minimal intellectual effort required from white librarians: neutrality is the safest position for libraries because it situates whiteness not only as default, but rewards and promotes white cultural values." – Angela Galvan

To move forward, we must continue critiquing the various norms and structures that make up our profession, including vocational awe, norms and expectations of professionalism, and tokenism. Leaders of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives must have developed expertise and research

in this area and hold a position with power and resources to create change [24]. Too often, organizations are content to pick the most available or willing person of color to lead diversity initiatives without considering their level of comfort and expertise in this area and without giving them the necessary authority or budget.

The work of equity, inclusion, and diversity is not just the responsibility of Black Indigenous, and people of color who are often more vulnerable to long-standing institutionalized issues, which furthers imbalances, since Black people often do not receive additional credit or pay for engaging in this difficult additional work [25]. White people need to use their power to address oppression and not expect the oppressed to try to achieve equity on their own. It is also important to pay those who are leading these initiatives and provide sufficient resources for the initiatives to be successful. Time, energy, and resources went into developing this expertise, and they deserve appropriate compensation and support [24].

Vocational awe continues to impede our progress when we think that librarianship is above reproach and critique [26]. To do this, we must be open to challenging the white supremacist culture that has permeated our profession. For instance, the concept of professionalism gives into the white supremacist ideals. Gray states, "In the workplace, white supremacy culture explicitly and implicitly privileges whiteness and discriminates against non-Western and non-white professionalism standards related to dress code, speech, work style, and timeliness" [27]. This might be an uncomfortable norm to grapple with; however, the underlying elements behind professionalism must be interrogated consistently, especially if libraries want to continue to bring in and retain Black librarians.

Once Black librarians are present, tokenism can become problematic. Tokenism is "the practice of making only a perfunctory or symbolic effort to do a particular thing, especially by recruiting a small number of people from underrepresented groups in order to give the appearance of sexual or racial equality within a workforce" [28]. Using the voice of a person from a historically excluded and marginalized group to quiet dissenters and other forms of tokenism have been used for centuries as a way to muffle the voices of Black people. It involves strategically placing a minoritized person because of their race, and this placement can be in an organizational structure, in a conversation, or in a room. Typically, this person has little to no power or influence, or their power lies in controlling opposition. Tokenism is an oppressive tool that shows up in libraries in a way that is unproductive and destructive, and the presence of a Black librarian or Black staff person does not count as diversity or inclusion.

Remove Financial Barriers

Equitable consideration can begin with hiring and promotion practices. Intentional retention practices should be implemented when identifying candidates and inviting them to interview. Libraries moving toward equity should abolish reimbursement culture. Reimbursement culture

places a burden on candidates to fund their interviews and expenses associated with scholarly activities, service commitments, and professional association fees. If Black people have less wealth or fewer resources and higher levels of student loan debt, why have institutions not moved toward equity to abolish reimbursements to address an existing harm?

Other practices that place financial burdens on potential and ongoing employment cause inequity. According to the 2019 MLA Diversity and Inclusion Task Force survey, at least 24% of MLA members received federal work-study, which means these librarians had to demonstrate financial need or hardship [29]. In addition to federal work-study, another 27% of respondents answered that they received some form of federal grants; federal Pell Grants require income thresholds to qualify for eligibility. Half (50%) of respondents indicated that they had taken out student loans to complete their educations. Therefore, action from libraries to abolish reimbursement culture is a concrete step toward equity.

Of note is work from Graber reported in *The Atlantic* that a Federal Reserve survey showed that 47% of respondents would be unable to gather $400 if they faced an emergency [30]. Other studies have shown that Black women have less economic security, earn less over the course of their lives, and encounter fewer opportunities to benefit from employment that provides substantial benefits, which impacts life long-term [31]. The “Black tax” refers to the transfer of wealth or assistance from emerging middle-class persons to their families, directly or indirectly. In other words, funds from middle-income Black families are often used to support economically less fortunate family members. The Black tax can extend beyond white heteronormative views of family to care for core and extended family members [32].

Structural inequality and intersectionality thus seep into the fabric of our libraries and stain them and the lives of Black employees. Therefore, institutions can address equity by not adding financial burdens to candidates or employees, especially in the name of professional development. Instead, resources should be allocated toward correcting past wrongs, including financial imbalances caused by inequitable pay or reimbursements that do not consider the accruing interest, and abolishing other costly practices for membership and participation in professional associations. Black staff should be provided with what they need to succeed [33].

Institute Equity Considerations

Conduct institutional analysis of racist structures at your library. An inventory of systemic racist structures will question how does white supremacy operate institutionally in a library environment? If there are any historically oppressed persons employed at an institution, those individuals have most likely encountered outright racism or dealt with microaggressions or other forms of hostility. Black-bodied persons will have likely been the target of anti-Black racism [34].

Audit the ways power is used in the organization and by whom. Institutional power in libraries is not divorced from the broader societal context. Libraries need to acknowledge that the air of libraries reeks with structural violence from the broader society and manifests in anti-Black racism. In libraries, this translates to being over-surveilled and receiving inequitable compensation, promotion, and support. To uproot the persistence of anti-Black racism, library leaders and managers need to act to tear down anti-Black practices. When you see something or something is brought to your attention, you must do something concrete to intervene. Act to monitor the ways that institutions do not support growth, equity, or the development of Black librarians and other Black library workers. Resources (financial and otherwise) must be allocated to correct the historical inequity.

In addition to redistributing opportunity and resources, library leaders and managers can move toward providing concrete outcomes to improve Black library workers' work experiences. Policies should be questioned to determine how they affect the outcomes of Black folks in library organizations. For example, policies around dress codes, including policing hairstyles and head coverings, have significant effects on how welcome libraries are toward our Black employees. Furthermore, a policy of providing active shooter training by armed police at a library or calling police against a Black person in the library comes with implications for Black employees' well-being, particularly those who have experienced adverse encounters with law enforcement.

Examine structures of credentialing and how the disparities in acquisition of degrees or education beyond the master's of library and information science (MLIS) can erect barriers for Black library employees. The increased emphasis on compounding credentialing acts to reinforce inequity and outcomes for Black staff.

Apply Benefit of Worthiness

Institutions struggle with the language related to giving when it comes to Black people; however, this same giving language provides favorable outcomes for white librarians. Cullinan has described three key concepts—worthiness, competence, and innocence—that operate to enhance racial subordination in libraries as they stifle and maintain outsider status for Black people [35]. Not ascribing worthiness to credentialed Black, Indigenous, and librarians of color frequently sidelines these librarians into precarious positions without adequate compensation or pathways to ascend in the ranks of librarianship.

The benefit of worthiness also impacts job prospects. Inexperienced white librarians who show promise receive the benefits of perceived worthiness, innocence, and competence, which lead to access and improved career incomes. However, Black librarians are placed in precarious temporary positions or work without titles or compensation that are aligned with their written or unwritten job duties; therefore, library leaders must act to equip Black librarians within and

outside of our institutions with the resources and opportunities to fill leadership and management roles. Start with "I" and implement concrete measures to ascribe worthiness, where Black colleagues are seen as "deserving and good enough to receive attention, services, respect, and the benefit of the doubt," to improve real outcomes for Black library workers throughout [36].

Conclusion

Ultimately, combating anti-Black structures and behaviors in libraries is not an action that can occur only when there is sufficient outrage around a particular incident. It is grueling work that must be ongoing to be effective. Not only is it work that does not come with much praise, it can also be met with anger, harassment, and attacks; however, the measures taken have an impact on the larger society.

Throughout US history, societal views on race and racism continue to evolve over time. While the oppression of Black people has remained constant, many races and ethnicities (particularly when intersecting with Black identity) have also faced discrimination. Therefore, the work toward equity for Black lives will benefit all minoritized groups, because the same standards and values of humanity should be extended to all. These steps are just a starting place and should not be read as a catch-all solution, because there is additional work needed, and ongoing progress can only occur through ongoing effort. As outer forces of the larger institutions and cultures surrounding libraries consistently introduce and reintroduce anti-Blackness, libraries must build capacity for counteracting these influences in order to see shifts in treatment and subsequent representation over the next 222 days, 22,000 days, and beyond.

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